

LAURENT BÈGUE



THE PSYCHOLOGY  
— of —  
GOOD *and* EVIL

OXFORD

# THE PSYCHOLOGY OF GOOD AND EVIL



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Laurent Bègue

Translation by Jodie André

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To William Shankland



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## PREFACE

### Opening Remarks

Whenever I share information on Facebook (a link to an interesting article or video, for example), one or two people usually respond but seldom more. However, one evening when I posted the very same question that my daughter Louise had asked over dinner, my page was flooded with comments within a few hours. The question was: “Dad, what proof do we have that human nature is fundamentally good?” There was a stream of reactions. With his enigmatic and off-the-wall sense of humor, one of my university colleagues wrote, “The right answer is 42,” while others added, “That’s an excellent opportunity to teach how to go beyond black and white thinking” and “Well, she’s a skeptical humanist!” As minutes went by, things became more precise. A friend of mine, who is a qualified literature teacher in France, switched to her hobby horse: “The problem is the adverb.” A French-speaking American activist for human rights recommended that “it [was] important not to be fooled by the initial bias.” And a Lebanese Jesuit thought it was useful to add, “Can a man be ‘fundamentally’ (ontologically) good or evil?” After a few other comments, a young playwright and stage director concluded, “What she needs is a good smack!” The following morning, I had no edifying answer to give to my 13-year-old daughter over breakfast, but there was proof that her question was of greater interest to my network of Facebook friends than were my videos of elephants cooperating with humans in Thailand or Leonard Cohen’s taciturn guitar chords.

The book you are holding is not a kind of “ethics-explained-to-my-daughter” book. Aristotle is never mentioned, while Kant is quoted only in passing. I do not focus on good and evil in themselves but on the forms that they take in our minds and the consequences that those ideas have on our personal lives and our interaction with others. This book, which relies heavily on findings published in scientific journals, does not argue in favor of any particular moral conception for another universal verdict about human goodness or maliciousness. However, it does talk a lot about the ways we imagine good and evil and about

our fundamental sociability. This book was written from the perspective of a discipline taught in universities and colleges, namely social psychology, research that provides original and often captivating insights into our human nature. Social psychologists are interested in the impact other people, whether present or absent, have on our ideas, our emotions, and our behaviors. They are therefore specially qualified to provide us with useful perspectives on moral phenomena and to use a wide variety of tools for that purpose, ranging from observing human interactions in a natural environment to brain imaging. For two decades I have been fascinated by social psychology, and in this book I focus on presenting the most recent findings of this field. Beginners will thus discover how our “moral intelligence” develops and is expressed through our social interactions. Readers who are already familiar with the discipline will learn about the contributions, both orthodox and innovative, of social psychology to the study of human morality.

Nowadays, the idea of ethics seems outdated, and yet it remains omnipresent in our societies. In the first half of the 21st century, after the prophecies of the twilight of duty<sup>1</sup> and the oracles of the end of ethics, ethics committees continue to blossom like tulips in the Netherlands, and more than ever we argue excitedly about norms that must be established in the technoscientific and economic spheres, as well as about the rules likely to govern the “human zoo.”<sup>2</sup> We are rather suspicious about ideas of good and evil, having become half-heartedly agnostic since the successive demythifications to which ethics was submitted by masters of suspicion such as Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud (not forgetting Darwin). Nevertheless, we spend most of our days judging who others are and what they do. In the same way, our actions, opinions, and appearances are assessed morning, noon, and night by our fellow men and women, who give them a meaning likely to influence the way they interact with us. The moral opinion expressed by other people about us varies according to our skin color, the thickness of our hair, the amount of body hair we have (a woman with hair on her legs or under her arms is considered less sociable and more aggressive than a woman without hair,<sup>3</sup> or what we eat—in cultures that have a phobia about lipids, those who eat fatty foods are regarded as morally inferior.<sup>4</sup> We give moral connotations to what we eat and drink, such as sugar,<sup>5</sup> wine,<sup>6</sup> or meat. Thus an individual eating steak or cheese will be regarded as less considerate and harsher than a person eating chicken and salad.<sup>7</sup>

In sum, we live in a world where good and evil seem like oxygen and hydrogen in an ocean of right-mindedness in which we have been immersed since we were born. One of the rules that philosophers usually obey—applying Hume’s wise advice—is not to confuse what people do (what is) with what they should do (what should be). If this rule is so important for professional “normologists,”

it is precisely due to individuals' constant and urgent tendency to shift from the one to the other. We can draw an analogy with research conducted about facial beauty assessment. The photographs of faces considered as the prettiest by most people usually display features shared by most people. By merging many faces together (thanks to digital technology), it is revealed that what we find beautiful is generally a set of features common to most of us.<sup>8</sup> Each one of us, without always being aware of it, is a *homo moralis*. I have a particularly meaningful personal example of this. Only a few hours after my son Matthieu left his amniotic environment in a hospital room, a nurse presented him with his first administrative certificate of good conduct by writing next to his temperature and the checklist of the care he had received, "behaving well."

One of the core ideas of this book is that we use the registers of good and evil and of right and wrong, most of the time likening them to each other, to give an opinion about to what extent other people's behaviors meet social expectations, and that we apply those same criteria to ourselves as well, albeit rather selectively. On a daily basis, we lavish praise and pour forth condemnation, sanctifying and demonizing individuals and groups.<sup>9</sup> We adhere to occasionally very constraining systems of norms, often out of mere unconscious mimicry, sometimes at the expense of great efforts and bitter sacrifices, in order to quench our moral aspirations, which express our quest for social recognition and our boundless search for social integration.<sup>10</sup> Our social experiences often lead us to conformism, but they can also be far richer. Even in less complex and culturally heterogeneous societies than ours, the moral life of humans does not only amount to blindly respecting a massive list of inviolable rules. In fact, nothing confronts us more directly with ethics than the conflicts between norms and values that we hold to be fundamental, which forces us to be socially creative and sometimes to disobey.

## Psychology of Robin Hood

Agathe, 71, was not able to pay her electricity bills anymore. When she returned home from the hospital after breaking a bone in an accident, an acquaintance who was supposed to have been looking after her cats had stolen part of the poor lady's savings.<sup>11</sup> Her debts started to pile up, until her electricity company decided to limit her consumption to 3 kilowatts, then to 1 kilowatt, before finally cutting off her power supply. Like several thousands of people in France, she was visited about 10 days later by an employee of the electricity company wearing a blue coat, a helmet, and insulated shoes (the famous "Playmobil uniform," as the employees call it). Unbeknownst to the company, the employee restored Agathe's electricity without official authorization. At the risk of losing their jobs, rebels

such as this carry out illicit missions in the name of their moral beliefs. “If someone asks you anything, just say that ‘Robin Hood’ came, but don’t describe me and don’t mention my name,” is their advice to those whose darkness they put an end to. When questioned, such rebels, who until then had been simply happy to cut off the electricity of well-known people, answer, “We thought that depriving rich people of electricity was a very good thing but that giving it to those who need it wouldn’t be a bad idea either.”

Moral rebellion and the questioning of instances of “established disorder”<sup>12</sup> that Elisabeth Weisman recently described in *La Désobéissance éthique*<sup>13</sup> are fascinating phenomena for social scientists, who have been less interested in Antigone’s dissidence than in Creon’s conformist legalism. While it seems to go without saying that our gregarious tendencies sometimes lead us to spectacular blindness, social protest and moral uprising render things more complex. Although willingly respectful of authority—sometimes reaching criminal extremes when we accept the destructive orders of pernicious authorities—we also have a permanent capacity for indignation and social resistance, and the actions of active minorities, when they are constant and coherent, are sometimes followed by long-lasting and profound changes.<sup>14</sup> Psychologically, we are able to think about norms, to question their validity and sometimes infringe on them for reasons that we think to be of a higher order. However, it would be wrong to believe that norms necessarily require a great deal of thought to influence action. We sometimes act in a rebellious way without being aware of it, on the spur of the moment. Thus, according to surveys of war veterans or sophisticated computer simulations of battlefields, it transpires that secret disobedience, which consists in not shooting the enemy during combat, is by far a majority behavior, most likely linked more to the deep-rooted inability to kill than to philosophical reasoning.<sup>15</sup>

## Everybody Does It!

In the field of ethics, the legitimacy of a norm of conduct mainly depends on the number of people who apply it—so much so that, as we will see, a way of justifying our actions consists of increasing in our imagination the number of people we think act like us. Do you know what the common denominator is of the people who steal towels from hotels, cheat insurance companies, or charge their clients unnecessary fees? Criminologist Thomas Gabor of the University of Toronto judiciously noted that they all tend to think or say that “everybody does it.”<sup>16</sup> Thus, when we act in a way that is open to criticism, we have at our disposal a tried-and-true mental technique: we simply think that we are

similar to everyone else. For example, when excessive drinkers are asked to give an estimation of their friends' alcohol consumption, they overestimate it.<sup>17</sup> If you want to know whether your neighbor manipulates other people, is unfaithful to his wife, or cheats on his taxes, ask him about the number of people who do the same! He will simply overestimate it.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, employees who claim that their colleagues are guilty of stealing from their company are also those who commit the most thefts.<sup>19</sup>

## A Science of Good and Evil?

Most of the works I present in this book are based on experimental studies that have the advantage of approaching scientific problems within a well-defined framework. Nowadays, psychology strives to scan our brains and measure our physiological movements, to assemble all kinds of utterances and representations, or to examine our facial micro-expressions and our behavior with other people. In the same way that studying the impact of variations in weather conditions on airplanes requires the creation of simulations using aeronautical wind tunnels in hangars, researchers in psychology must vary certain factors while keeping others constant in order to decipher the critical causes that really affect social behavior. In the field of ethics, developing experiments has allowed progress on centuries-old questions, such as the existence of the so-called fundamental selfishness of human beings, the impact of emotions on moral judgment, or the determinants of what we used to call "willpower."

Psychology also brings new perspectives on moral judgment thanks to the evolution of its research techniques. Following the example of the microscope, which revolutionized cell biology, certain innovations have had a tremendous impact in the field of psychology, allowing ideas to be tested for the first time. For example, according to an old theory, expressing a strict moral opinion about homosexuality is the consequence of a defensive negation of one's homosexual urges, which are repressed. But how can we verify such a hypothesis? The invention of an instrument (a plethysmograph, which is an elastic band containing mercury used to measure changes in the blood flow in the penis) allowed that hypothesis to be examined with a touch of modernity. It was observed in a research study that if men who were very critical of homosexuality (their attitudes had been measured a few days before by a questionnaire measuring homophobia) were presented with movies showing homosexual intercourse, they had a greater tendency to have an erection than other men, despite the fact that they claimed not to feel aroused by these movies. For example, 80% of the homophobic men showed an increase in the circumference of their penis, while

only 34% of the non-homophobic men did.<sup>20</sup> This study shows that in the field of social judgment, some hypotheses cannot be easily verified without specific technical innovations.

Brain imaging is a technique that can be considered more decisive for scientific progress than plethysmography. Using functional magnetic resonance imaging, it is possible to study the brain functions involved in psychological phenomena due to changes in oxygenation, which increases locally in the areas activated by a blood flow. This technique used in fascinating research into the pleasure that we feel when we watch a transgressor in action or the member of another group experiencing pain during an experiment.<sup>21</sup> In the sphere of moral judgment, it is essential to have evaluation tools that do not rely exclusively on speech, because verbalizations are often used by participants to influence positively what we think about them (or what they think about themselves). In other cases, verbalization is used to justify phenomena, the causes of which elude individuals. This important idea is illustrated throughout the book.

## Outline of This Book

Each of the 12 chapters that make up this book focuses on a central aspect of the psychology of good and evil. The first chapter is a guided tour of the moral self, the part of our conscious self that evaluates the extent to which what we notice about ourselves and others matches what we call good and evil. One of the main ideas of the first chapter is that our marked preference for our own self leads us to show excessive optimism about our personal qualities and, very often, to think of ourselves as superior to other people. Another significant idea of this chapter is that in certain circumstances, our moral compass can become blurred, and our moral norms thus partly lose their capacity to influence our behavior. Chapter 2 sheds light on the conditions that favor honesty and demonstrates that our respect for moral rules can weaken if material and social circumstances leave us at liberty to infringe upon them. Chapter 3 exemplifies our capacity to give or deprive human beings of moral worth through how we use animals to condemn vices or facilitate acts of violence against antagonistic groups. According to Plato, the group is itself conceived of as a “big animal” from which individuals should free themselves.<sup>22</sup> Conversely, we will discover in chapter 4 that human groups contribute to individuation and humanization, giving meaning to our lives, as well as a sense of safety. Chapter 5 then describes the psychological mechanisms by which moral norms become internalized and presents, in particular, elements that favor and hinder the development of our moral identity. Chapter 6

continues those ideas by describing the importance of imitation among human beings and its strong contribution to the harmonization of our social relations. Imitation is a cornerstone of human ethics, yet it does not account for the possibility of moral rebellion and the rejection of norms established by most people. Chapter 7 therefore broadens our perspective by introducing the various forms of conscious moral reasoning, their evolution and their consequences on action. We will see that, like a precocious philosopher in the most exotic of cultural environments, the child and then the human adult actively apprehend the domains of moral judgment and subtly discriminate between norms according to their quality—those that protect the integrity and the well-being of human beings are most often considered as inviolable, whereas others are regarded as mere constructs or social conventions with no imperative necessity. However, we see in chapter 8, certain emotions, such as disgust, sometimes channel our thoughts and actions in a spectacular way, and the mere appearance of things and people has an impact on the moral qualities that we attribute to them. That is the reason we show ambivalence toward the world of survivors. We are quick to distance ourselves from it and to see behind every unhappy destiny a hidden meaning or even a buried moral mistake, but we are also eager to comfort and assist without delay any victim whose pain moves us deeply. This is examined in chapter 9. Chapter 10 leads us behind the curtain of the moral theater in order to discover the hidden motives of our public actions and understand the mechanisms of duplicity and moral hypocrisy, which are sometimes deliberate and sometimes unintentional. Chapter 11 examines the situations that seem to make us go to “the dark side” and commit acts that we usually condemn. Often what seems to give situations their dictatorial dimension is the apparent confusion into which they throw us in relation to our deepest convictions. Chapter 12 deals more directly with what influences our capacity to act according to the norms that we want to obey. It focuses on explaining why our will sometimes becomes confused or falters and how to remedy that.

Let us now begin our journey to how we think about our representations of good and evil. Our first stop will lead us to a land whose geography is of paramount interest: our moral self.





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Writing a book about the psychology of good and evil from a purely academic point of view may prove difficult for someone who shares the everyday life of children in full moral development! As I have this good fortune, I would like to thank my children, Louise, Sophie, Raphaëlle, Matthieu, and Lucile, for the impetus they give to my life and to my thought.



# 1 THE MORAL SELF

*It is not love we should have painted as blind, but self-love.*

—VOLTAIRE<sup>1</sup>

In the aftermath of World War II, several war criminals took a battery of psychological tests including the famous inkblot test commonly known as the “Rorschach test,” which is named after its creator. The core of this projective test consists of asking individuals to interpret a series of shapeless blots that are presented on cards. On the basis of the associations that are spontaneously produced (e.g., what animals are “seen” in the pictures, how details are understood, etc.), psychologists thought they could identify unconscious phenomena and make a diagnostic judgment of the subjects’ personalities.<sup>2</sup> Several international experts analyzed thoroughly the verbalizations produced by Nazis in reaction to these blots. One of the conclusions of this investigation was striking and most unexpected: differentiating former SS officers from others turned out to be impossible.<sup>3</sup> More recently, however, one of the experts observed that a distinctive feature of the criminals was that they had rather limited empathic skills. He also noticed that many of them had perceived in the inkblots an animal that is almost never identified in this sort of test—a chameleon.<sup>4</sup> It is noteworthy that those who perceived chameleons in the blots managed to escape execution more often than those who did not.

In numerous situations, we melt into our environment. But in others, our self desperately attempts to distinguish itself from it. The way we describe, judge, or present ourselves to other people mainly depends on the context around us, and we often do these things instinctively. We automatically adjust our position, our verbal delivery, our facial expressions, or our walking pace to our immediate surroundings. Moreover, significant aspects of our sense of identity fluctuate depending on the people with whom we communicate or the material conditions in which we interact. For example, personally, I feel a stronger sense of belonging to the university community when I talk with a group of students between two classes than when I chat with my neighbor while trimming my garden hedge on

a Saturday afternoon. Sometimes adjusting to a role is intentional. In order to make a certain impression, we display a particular aspect of our personality more markedly. We will return to this phenomenon later on. But most of the time, we move about on the social stage unconsciously synchronizing or adjusting what we express, as if we were on “automatic pilot.”

## The Self and Its Reflections

Self-awareness, a preliminary condition for understanding other people's affective and mental states, is often considered a privilege that sets men and women apart from other animal species. As the owners of this rare jewel, human beings do not fail to make it the symbol of their divine nature. However, reflexive consciousness is only one of the numerous forms of “self” that can be found in nature. The first degree of self is the “here-and-now” self, as it is shaped by our living environment. According to Michael Gazzaniga and Todd Heatherton, professors of cognitive neuroscience at Dartmouth College,<sup>5</sup> this minimal self can be attributed to insects, birds, and fish. Only at a more advanced mental level does the “objectivized” self come into play, which refers to the capacity of being aware of one's own mental state. In this case, the self can become an object of attention for individuals. Gordon Gallup, researcher at the University of Albany, studied the concept of the reflexive self in chimpanzees by means of ingenious experiments using a mirror. Gallup noticed that the apes used the mirror to look at parts of their body they could not see. They used it to explore their mouths, contemplate their teeth, or find lice so they could rid themselves of it. In a notable study, one researcher administered general anesthesia to chimpanzees before covering some of the body parts they could not see directly (e.g., the top of their ears) with an odorless and nonirritating paint. After waking up, as the chimpanzees were facing the mirror, they did not touch the mirror but rather their colored body parts, which suggests that they were fully aware that the body reflected in the mirror was theirs.<sup>6</sup> These observations applied to other apes such as gorillas and orangutans but not to very young monkeys. The list of animals that distinguish themselves in the colored-stain test has grown longer over the years. Using unusually heavy experimental procedures, some researchers showed that dolphins and elephants were capable of “passing the test.” As far as human beings are concerned, before the age of 17 months on average,<sup>7</sup> infants who are turned into laboratory clowns by having their noses painted red without their knowing it believe a show is taking place in the mirror in front of them. As a result, they seek to grab the nose they see in the mirror

and simply ignore their own.<sup>8</sup> It is only after this age that infants can rival the animals they later discover in zoos.

The basic forms of self-awareness observed in certain apes and infants represent a very limited aspect of self-related phenomena. The highest degree of self is called the symbolic (or narrative) self, and this allows self-representation through time by means of language. It includes the sense of identity, an autobiographical memory of the past, and expectations and beliefs associated with the future. According to recent work, the development and expression of self-awareness are linked to the growth of the frontal lobes, a distinct part of the brain. For example, when we process self-related information, our medial frontal lobes are over-activated.<sup>9</sup> If those frontal lobes happen to be damaged, so will self-awareness, even if our intellectual capacities remain intact.<sup>10</sup> In addition to the reflexive self and its different degrees, there are two other central aspects of self: the interpersonal self (defined by its interactions with other people) and the self as an agent that performs an action on itself and on the environment.<sup>11</sup> The rest of this chapter deals with the aspect of self-reflexive knowledge. Other aspects are dealt with in the following chapters.

## Self-Awareness

The reflexive self plays a crucial role in human ethics. It refers to the “capacity to create a second-rate representation of one’s own mental states.”<sup>12</sup> It is therefore recursive—individuals are aware of being aware. This self-knowledge enables us to put ourselves in other people’s shoes and to simulate their own mental states. Thus we can imagine what they think, and we can wonder about the possible gap between what they think and what we would like them to think. This awareness of other people’s internal states, which is involved in perspective taking, is called “cognitive empathy.”<sup>13</sup> See Figure 1.1.

Our self is involved in diverse central aspects of our moral behavior, since it carries the knowledge of what makes up our personal identity—our story. Such knowledge is produced by experience and can be partially accessed through introspection. However, this process has limitations. Until the age of 11, children think that their parents know them better than they know themselves.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, we may have “false memories,” which have sometimes been instilled in us by our close relations and are difficult to distinguish from genuine memories.<sup>15</sup> The reflexive self (“oneself,” “I”) processes and coordinates the cognitive representations that define us individually. We all carry a self-schema that organizes the information relating to the self in a hierarchical fashion.



**FIGURE 1.1** The reflexive self enables us to have a representation of other people's mental states and our own.

Collecting and stocking this information in our memory stems from a desire for self-knowledge. We want to know precisely who we are and what makes us different from other people, and we are sometimes capable of receiving unflattering information about ourselves.

The moral self plays a particularly important role in the way we define ourselves. It concerns the ethical norms that are directly involved in our relations with other people. This aspect of the self expresses itself in a descriptive mode. It can be found in the answers we would give to the famous “Who am I?” test,<sup>16</sup>

for example: “I am an honest person,” “I am someone trustworthy,” “I have a tendency to lie,” and so on. The moral self also uses orders and directives, such as “I must persevere,” “I must be kinder,” and so forth. This ideal exerts constant pressure on the self, which spares no effort to ensure and promote a positive view of itself. When the gap between our current self-perception and our ideal self-representation is too wide, we feel disappointed and frustrated.<sup>17</sup>

## The Self Takes Care of Itself

The self is preoccupied by the essential concern of preserving an acceptable representation of itself. Defining oneself consists of expressing one’s worth or defending it when it is questioned. Toward the end of Nazi dignitary Rudolf Höss’s autobiography, he concluded, “I, too, had a heart,” and when Himmler described his personality, he specified that he was “not a bloodthirsty person, not a man who takes pleasure or joy when something rough must be done.”<sup>18</sup> Although it is noteworthy, the effort these well-known Nazis apparently made not to be likened to cruel monsters is nonetheless relatively common. When a Khmer Rouge who was a member of the security committee in charge of the fight against the “enemies of the party” was questioned by a survivor of Tuol Sleng jail—where the worst atrocities were committed under Pol Pot—he answered, “We were all victims, without exception.”<sup>19</sup> The rhetoric of self-exculpation and that of victimhood are sometimes twinned. Presenting oneself as a victim, as the French writer Pascal Bruckner suggests, is “endowing yourself with the double power of blaming and demanding.”<sup>20</sup> We treat the information, situations, or people that confirm our own perceptions with particular care, which lessens and sometimes even annihilates our search for a correct piece of information about ourselves. Finally, not only do we seek coherence, but we also idolize information that enhances our qualities and often disregard that which casts us in a negative light.<sup>21</sup>

## Ego Games: The Unconscious Influences of Self-Love

Without always being aware of it, we treasure all that is connected with our self. For example, during a noisy party, we unintentionally pay attention to fragments of conversations that are not aimed at us merely because they contain the same syllables as our name.<sup>22</sup> The particular attention we pay to everything that is linked to us and that is simply observed through this phenomenon (called the “cocktail party effect”) takes a variety of forms. It begins with the letters of our first name or last name, which we unconsciously prefer to the other letters of



the alphabet (irrespective of how often these letters are used in our language).<sup>23</sup> This effect is especially pronounced concerning our initials and also applies, for some people, to their partner's initials.<sup>24</sup> The consequences of such a preference are not trivial. Insignificant as the effect may be, the places people live and their career choices are influenced by their degree of resemblance to their first names! For example, on the basis of a sample of the American population, Brett Pelham showed that the probability of one becoming a dentist is higher if one's name is Dennis and that of becoming a lawyer is higher if one's name is Lawrence. In the same way, people are more likely to move to Louisiana or St. Louis if they are called Louise.<sup>25</sup> This striking phenomenon was confirmed in 12 European languages.<sup>26</sup> It also applies to people's partners: we are slightly more inclined to marry people whose name looks like ours. Recently, researchers have shown that the mere fact of sharing a common initial with the name of a hurricane (e.g., K. for Katrina) increased the amount of money respondents gave in support of victims.<sup>27</sup> As I shared my surprise at this finding with an economist colleague, sending her a supporting digital copy of Pelham's article, she answered on the very same day: "Unbelievable! I just bought a house in Dangu [a small town in the northwest of Paris]." Because her last name is Tournyol du Clos, I did not react immediately. But she added straight away, "My maiden name is Dang-Vu!"

The particular attention we pay to our own self accounts for numerous phenomena that affect us on a daily basis. One of the most obvious of these is the powerful homophily mechanism that governs our social interactions. We share our activities, and sometimes our lives, with people who tend to resemble us. All over the world, similarities can be observed within groups of friends or couples. Regarding the latter, a consistent correspondence has been noted in terms of height, physical attractiveness, personality traits, values, intellectual quotient, education, and mental health.<sup>28</sup> Compared to a random person, our partner usually shows well-being and anxiety or stress levels that are closer to ours, according to questionnaires or assessments based on physiological signs.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, their probability for suffering from high cholesterol levels or hypertension increases if we ourselves present similar health issues.<sup>30</sup> We are ordinarily more willing to trust someone who bears a physical resemblance to us.<sup>31</sup> Our quest for resemblance goes even further. Women who had a healthy affective relationship with their father tend to choose as partners men who share morphofacial similarities with him.<sup>32</sup>

Evidently, the people within our social circle also influence us in return. For example, happy people are more often surrounded by happy friends, which reinforces their well-being. A study conducted with 5,000 people over 10 years showed that when a fortunate event happens to a friend of ours living within a radius of less than 2 km, the possibility that we feel happier ourselves as a result

of this event increases by 25%.<sup>33</sup> Conversely, if our loved ones feel depressed, we too will be more disheartened.<sup>34</sup>

Another phenomenon proving our self-centeredness is our tendency to memorize information better when it is related to us. In a clever experiment, a researcher presented volunteers with a series of words and simply instructed them to indicate whether or not those words described them personally. In another experimental condition, no link was found between the participants and the words they read. During a recall test a few minutes later, however; they remembered best the words they thought related to themselves, even when they had indicated that those words did not describe them.<sup>35</sup> That is, the mere fact of associating a word with oneself left a more significant mnemonic trace. Teachers are well aware of this trend. It is part of a general phenomenon in which we give more value to things that, one way or another, are connected with our self. For example, Ellen Langer of Harvard University allowed students to choose a lottery ticket. When someone offered to purchase their tickets before the result of the draw, the students requested a price four times higher when they had chosen the numbers on the ticket themselves than when they had been given one at random.<sup>36</sup> Mere ownership of an object, even when it has not been used or has not become familiar, is sufficient for us to overestimate its value if we have the opportunity to resell it. More strikingly, imagining that we own an object or a service increases the subjective value that is imparted to it.<sup>37</sup>

In a study that illustrated this “endowment effect,” volunteers were told they would have to formulate a judgment on a series of small objects (e.g., a stapler or a piece of candy). However, a few minutes before the evaluation, they actually received one of those objects as a present. The results of the evaluation showed that they invariably judged the objects that had been offered to them more favorably than the other objects. Moreover, when the evaluation was preceded by a test that they had failed, they evaluated the objects even more positively, as if judging the objects also depended on self-judgment.<sup>38</sup>

## The Self: A Totalitarian System?

The often very flattering self-schemas we create have the same properties of information selection as those we create about other people. For instance, when volunteers are shown a video of a person celebrating someone’s birthday with her partner and are incidentally informed of her occupation, those who are asked to recall the scene afterward tend to remember that the person in question wore glasses and listened to classical music if she was presented as a bookseller, or that she was a beer-drinker and owned a television set if she was presented

as a waitress.<sup>39</sup> We are constantly affected by the same kind of phenomenon, which often takes the form of selecting of what enhances our sense of worth. Our memory adjusts the knowledge we retain of our past behaviors to ensure self-promotion. When we do not like a piece of information about ourselves, we are more than willing to become amnesic! Research studies have also shown that we overestimate our former salaries or the size of what we think were generous gifts to charities, and we underestimate the number of alcoholic drinks we had at a party.<sup>40</sup> In a brilliant article titled “The Totalitarian Ego,” Anthony Greenwald of Ohio University compared the methods used by the self to those of a dictator who controls information, resorts to propaganda, and rewrites history in a biased way.<sup>41</sup> As in 1984’s Orwellian world, any information seems enslaved by the self’s relentless selective functioning, which leaves nothing to chance. To illustrate this tendency, Greenwald mentions a study in which a group of students, one week after answering a question regarding the importance of students’ involvement in decision-making regarding university curricula, were asked to write an essay expressing their opposition to students’ involvement in curriculum decisions. In relation to the theory of cognitive dissonance,<sup>42</sup> their initial opinion had been influenced (an average displacement of 10 points on a 60-point scale). Immediately after they finished the essay, the students were asked to remember how they had answered the question regarding students’ involvement in university curriculum the week before. The results showed that, on average, they minimized their previous opinion by 10 points of out 60, while not being aware of this change.<sup>43</sup> Most of the time, when it comes to information that affects us closely, we forget it in a rather predictable way. As world expert on memory Daniel Schacter of Harvard University writes, one of the “deadly sins” of our memory is altering the information that we remember in order to see ourselves in a more positive light.<sup>44</sup> Forgetting, as Nietzsche stated in his *Généalogie de la morale*, is not a *vis inertiae* (an unmovable strength) but an active capacity. Without forgetfulness, “there could be no happiness, no serenity, no hope, no pride, no present.”<sup>45</sup>

## Moral Self-Sufficiency

The humbleness and modesty that most established religions have sought to build in the faithful do not come out of nowhere. Moral self-importance is so universal and holds so many seeds of discord between individuals that human societies have made it a priority to limit its effects and to invite their members to lower themselves a little closer to ground level (the etymology of the word “humility” refers to *humus*, i.e., soil). Pride and vanity are two of the seven deadly sins of